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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000308

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [KWMN](#) [KU](#)

SUBJECT: SYNERGY CONFERENCE LAUNCHES KUWAITI ELECTION SEASON

REF: A. KUWAIT 255

[1](#)B. KUWAIT 270

[1](#)C. KUWAIT 244

[1](#)D. KUWAIT 53

Classified By: A/DCM Pete O'Donohue for reasons 1.4 b and d

Summary:

[1](#)1. (C) A March 23-25 National Synergy Conference, hosted by Tanami, Kuwait's first women's political association, effectively launched Kuwait's two month electoral season, which will culminate with a May 16 vote for a new Parliament.

The conference provided the venue for an open and free-ranging televised discussion among various strata of Kuwait's political scene, including the ruling family, liberals and Salafis. A spirited dialogue included calls to review the constitution and freely expressed criticism of the weak government and alleged manipulation by Al Sabah family members. MPs were also not immune to criticism from rapporteurs, who accused many of having misplaced loyalties. The cachet of this unprecedented conference was further boosted by the presence at its closing session of the influential Shaykh Ahmad Al-Fahad, who is positioning himself for more prominence in Kuwaiti leadership. End Summary.

Tanami Conference Unites Liberals and Conservatives

[1](#)2. (SBU) A March 23-25 National Synergy Conference demonstrated the first substantial foray into the national political scene by Tanami, the first women's political association in Kuwait. Tanami (Arabic: "gradual development") -- formed in 2008 to empower women in national decision-making roles and to prepare society to accept these new roles for women -- demonstrated its new-found political might by the participation in the televised conference of some 30 prominent Kuwaitis. This group of notables hailed from both liberal and conservative backgrounds and included academics, intellectuals, political and human rights activists, former ministers and MPs (including Speaker Jassem Al-Khorafi), columnists and leaders of political associations. The Ambassador (alone among her counterparts) was also invited to attend the opening session. While it is not yet clear whether Tanami will itself front or support a particular candidate (female or male), the strategic timing of this event on the heels of the March 16 cabinet resignation (ref A) and the March 18 constitutional dissolution of parliament (ref B) suggests that Tanami -- along with some other Kuwaiti thinkers -- believes that the pending May elections and ministerial shuffle may provide an opportunity to generate leaders capable of unclogging the political impasse that currently defines Kuwaiti governance.

Open Discussion

13. (SBU) Discussions in the conference ranged freely from critiques of the existing 1962 constitution -- with some rapporteurs calling for various amendments, including a call for political parties -- to visions of the future of Kuwait, prospects of which were widely viewed as full of potential, but bleak absent national consensus. Conference participants tended to focus on the perceived continued deterioration of the relationship between the executive and legislative branches, with many laying considerable blame on the press, which some viewed as a promotional tool of agenda-driven ruling family members or private interests.

Allocating Blame

14. (SBU) Commentaries from many participants attributed most of the woes that beset the recently ousted PM Shaykh Nasser to internal ruling family spats. The GOK was also thrashed for its perceived lack of vision and its failure to move forward on development plans and strategies. Participants were fairly unanimous in their assessment that Kuwaiti government ministers were unable to manage their portfolios appropriately due to the almost constant threat of interpellation by opposition MPs. MPs, meanwhile, according to many rapporteurs, failed Kuwait by placing tribal loyalties (ref C) or self-serving agendas over the common need for improvements in education, healthcare, infrastructure and other social mandates.

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Ruling Family Member Addresses Audience

15. (SBU) Just back from a jaunt to the West Bank and Jordan where he met with Palestinian and Jordanian leaders on Asian Olympic matters (thereby drawing a great deal of local press attention), Shaykh Ahmad Al-Fahd Al Sabah closed the conference. In his warmly received speech, he dismissed charges that internal Al Sabah squabbles were contributing to the deterioration of Kuwait's leadership or that the Al Sabahs had played Machiavellian games in prompting interpellations of the Prime Minister. He asserted that internal Al Sabah dynamics are normal: "Like all families, we sometimes have differences in opinion." He praised the Amir for his wise handling of the ongoing political crisis, suggesting that constitutional dissolution of parliament was the best course; more drastic measures (such as an unconstitutional dissolution) could have led to a worsening downward spiral in Kuwait's political life.

16. (SBU) Speaking without notes for over forty minutes about the need to look beyond the current political turmoil, Shaykh Ahmad Al-Fahd then stayed for an additional hour to respond to a series of questions. He refused to be drawn out over provocative questions on internal Al Sabah squabbles or corruption charges. Instead, connecting with the audience, he referred to many of the participants by name, thereby deftly demonstrating "common touch" relationships with liberals and salafis alike. In response, panelists -- including his detractors -- dropped all formalities, referring to him by the familiar and endearing Kuwaiti naming convention of "Bou Fahd" (Arabic: "Fahd's Dad").

Comment:

17. (C) Shaykh Ahmad Al-Fahd's concluding address to the conference was a tremendous PR boon for Tanami, but came as a surprise. It is rare that ruling family members make themselves available for non-official or non-ceremonial events, and even rarer for them to put themselves in front of potential detractors in an open forum covered by live

television. The Amir's ambitious nephew is clearly positioning himself for a prominent role in the future Kuwaiti leadership. He has successfully built a solid base of political support by reinstalling Kuwait in FIFA (ref D) through his role as head of the Asian Olympic Committee, and his recent trip to the West Bank (which played on Kuwaiti sympathies for the Palestinian victims of perceived Israeli aggression.) Shaykh Ahmad is also nominal head of Kuwait's National Security Bureau. Notwithstanding his democratic touch, however, he renders many Kuwaitis uncomfortable both because of his obvious ambition and a reputation for graft. The questions surrounding him now center mainly on how high his ambitions will rise and what moves he will make to achieve them.

18. (C) It is too early to tell what impact Tanami will have on the upcoming elections, but the conference organizers clearly demonstrated an ability to pull disparate voices together for a rare congenial political dialogue. Their political astuteness included inviting the US Ambassador to attend the opening session as an observer, prominently seated for the sake of media coverage, as well as Embassy observers for the remaining sessions, a clear signal to the ruling family that the US supports an ongoing constitutional and parliamentary process. End comment.

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